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AUTHOR Calderonello, Alice
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ABSTRACT

The professionalization of composition studies in relation to other disciplines has created a drive for standardization (in response to the need to be distinctive from other fields), which has as a negative consequence the devaluing of practitioner knowledge. Further, the process of projecting value on the discipline involves the "scientification" of the field, promoting the distinction between theoretical and practical knowledge. Thus composition specialists may be distancing themselves from pedagogy. Three specific trends are notable as professionalization continues. Firstly, more upper-level courses and graduate programs in composition studies will be established to provide work for the increasing number of Ph.D. specialists. This process will remove the persons with the most training in rhetoric/composition from undergraduate writing classes. Secondly, the increasing pressure to do research and to vie with one another for professional survival and/or advancement will force greater numbers of composition specialists to demand reduced teaching loads, which will in turn create pressure to increase class size in undergraduate courses, and/or to hire additional underpaid part-time instructors. Thirdly, the increasing fragmentation of composition studies and the resulting hierarchy of subspecialties will ensure that the needs of some student populations will continue to be addressed, while the needs of others will be ignored. One tentative step that the composition professionals might take towards making the profession responsive to more of its members and to more of the students is to examine the enterprise a bit more carefully. (PRA)

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Professionalism of Rhetoric/Composition: Consequences and Commitment

Alice Calderonello

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Professionalism of Rhetoric/Composition: Consequences and Commitment

As you know, the theme of this year's 4C's is "Times of Trial, Reorientation, and Reconsideration: A fin de siecle Review/Prophecy." In the Call For Proposals that we received last year, Program Chair William Cook asked us to look backwards to gain a sense of what we'd become as an integral part of the process of looking forward and envisioning our future together. I am sure that countless narratives--both our own and those of our students and colleagues--are embedded within and have helped to constitute the history of 4C's and of the discipline of Rhetoric/Composition.

Perhaps most of these stories are celebratory--recounting tales of triumph and prophesying a golden future for our profession. Or maybe not. It may be that the existence of our discipline will be short-lived. Recall Stephen North's gloomy forecast in The Making of Knowledge in Composition: Portrait of an Emerging Field (1987): he feared that Rhetoric/Composition, characterized by incompatible, unreconcilable methodological differences, might self-destruct in a kind of unchecked centrifugal frenzy.

It isn't easy to make predictions about the future; and, in any case, that's not exactly what I want to talk with you about today, anyhow. Instead, I'd like for a few moments to look at some current phenomena that may have been caused--or at least intensified--by the emergency of the discipline of Rhetoric/Composition or Composition Studies [I'm going to use the terms interchangeably this afternoon] and to suggest that the phenomena are not entirely positive.

In describing these phenomena, I'd like to take the approach of first looking at how increasing professionalization may be influencing Composition Studies when we view it as a unified entity existing within a field populated by other disciplines such as sociology, computer science, and the like. Then I'd like to view Composition Studies again, this time observing the effects of

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professionalization when we imagine our field of study as an object isolated from other professions or disciplines. So first:

Some effects of professionalization on Composition Studies as we look at it in relation to other disciplines

I suppose one of the first questions that naturally comes to mind during the course of an inquiry about how a "New" discipline emerges and defines itself in contrast to older, already established fields of study is this: How does an emerging discipline project itself as being distinctive? If a "market" for specialists in Composition is to exist, for example, Composition Studies has to offer a unique commodity. That is, the constellation of information, skills, and knowledge that constitutes Composition Studies must be seen as significantly different from those constellations associated with other disciplines.

But since products or goods (if I may call them that) of "information, skills, and knowledge" are usually intangible in form, they are (to quote Magali Larson from her book, The Rise of Professionalism, 1977), "inextricably bound to the person and the personality of the producer." Now remember, a discipline must be distinctive in contrast to other fields to be perceived as such; so how does a field of study (especially an emerging one) maintain its recognizability if its good are tied up with individual producers? Again, Ms. Larson has an answer to this question. She suggests such conditions require that "the producers themselves have to be produced if the products of commodities are to be given a distinctive form." What this means is that if you cannot separate me from my teaching or my research in the same way in which you can separate an automobile (or a pen or a box of raisins) from its producers, then I have to be trained, educated, and socialized so that I will be able to provide services that are recognizably "rhet/compy"--even if they are individualistic at the same time.

If this train of thinking seems not entirely unreasonable to you so far, we can follow it a bit further: As the number of individuals who require education and socialization increases, the process of standardization (which involves, among other things, the creation and the maintenance of a stable field of knowledge/methodology that a discipline can claim as its own) should intensify, which I think it has in the case of Rhetoric/Composition. Evidence of this drive for standardization in our discipline can be seen in the increasing number of searches (some claiming to be successful; some lamenting their lack of success), for a Unifying Composition Studies Paradigm or Purpose. A recent example of such a search is the engaging essay by Richard Fulkerson in the December 1990 issue of CCC, entitled "Composition Theories in the Eighties: Axiological Consensus and Paradigmatic Diversity."

Standardization, I am sure, has its good and bad points. But one of the negative consequences of this process may be that it has contributed to the devaluing of practitioner knowledge (what Stephen North falls "lore"). Lore, as defined by North, must surely be a significant impediment to the process of standardization since it is varied and multiplex, comprised of the traditions, practices, and beliefs of countless composition practitioners. To quote him, "literally anything can become of part of lore. The only requirement for entry is that the idea, notion, practice, or whatever be nominated: some member of the community must claim that it worked, or seemed to work, or might work" (p. 24) This depiction of lore implies that it is intimately bound with individual practitioners, and thus, predictably, susceptible to devaluation by a nascent discipline which is in the act of transforming itself into a distinctive, recognizable commodity, in part through the process of standardization.

If the process of standardization is necessary in creating an ideology of distinctiveness, a vital prerequisite for an emerging discipline, so too is the

process of projecting value. After all, merely being recognized as a distinctive commodity is hardly enough to attract consumers; a discipline must be able to compete with other disciplines for resources--students, space, library acquisitions, funds, and so forth. And to be competitive, a discipline must be perceived (at the very least) as being "legitimate."

Now, for some time the most dominant mode of legitimation has been that of science; and as a consequence most professions and academic disciplines have adopted a scientific basis for professional unification, since such a basis confers legitimacy upon a pursuit by creating the appearance of a systematic, depersonalized means of inquiry, which (in turn) implies that the knowledge acquired by this means will be objective and reproducible, transcendent and ahistorical. Unfortunately, the "scientification" of a discipline (if I may call it that) seems to intensify the process whereby theoretical and practical knowledge becomes increasingly distinct, which, in turn, subordinates practical knowledge and those who produce it.

I think that Stephen North interpreted the events he studied in his history of the emergency of Composition Studies as a version of this process because he claims that what marked Composition's "emergence as a nascent academic field more than anything else [was] the need to replace practice as the field's dominant mode of inquiry." (p. 15). North seems also to have assumed that this phenomenon would continue; in his final chapter entitled, "Future," he predicted that Composition scholars who remained in English Departments would "try to increase their distance from practice" (p. 367); and characterized "practicality" as a "liability. . . for Composition Scholars trying to survive in the context of a field like literary studies." (p. 368).

Although some of us may find it ironic that one of the possible consequences of the professionalization of Composition Studies is a mad

scramble on the part of credentialed "Specialists" to get out of the classroom (and by extension away from the teaching of writing) a variety of contemporary sources do seem to lend credence to this gloomy supposition. Remember, if you will, Jane Peterson's Chair's Address at the 1990 4C's Convention, subsequently published in the February 1991 issue of CCC, in which she argued that we don't (as a profession) value teaching, that we "consider teaching far less important than research or scholarship." (p. 27). Of course, Peterson's observations are impressionistic; she provided neither data nor a theoretical analysis to support her claims. But recently, one of my colleagues graciously provided me with a paper by Thomas Huckin, who made an intensive study of 4C's proposals for 1988 and also examined topic indexes of 4C's conventions from 1981-1988; his findings regarding the 1988 proposals suggest that the theoretical proposals were more likely to be selected to appear on the conference program that those that emphasized pedagogy. More disturbing, however, the results of his longitudinal study suggest that "the bias. . .observed. . .against pedagogy-oriented proposals for [the 1988] 4C's [was] not a one-time aberration but is part of a general trend" (which he found noticeable from 1983 on). (p. 12)

Further, Susan, Miller, while offering yet a different sort of analysis of Composition Studies in her book Textual Carnivals: The Politics of Composition (1991), has suggested that the "existence of composition within English permits literature to displace and translate an older social identity [of being soft (or nonscientific) and feminine] onto only one of its part [namely, composition]." (p. 139) I wonder: Mightn't such a displacement (and the resulting image problem it creates for Composition Studies) provide additional support for the claim that Composition Specialists have reason to--and may be--distancing themselves from pedagogy, especially since there is evidence

that our discipline is becoming increasingly feminized? [For the Hard data about that I invite you to read "Women's Work: the Feminizing of Composition" by Sue Ellen Holbrook in the Spring 1991 issue of Rhetoric Review.]

I've already spent more time that I intended in examining the effects of the professionalization of Composition Studies when we look at it is a discipline in an array with others. But I do want to take a few moments to look at Composition as if it were an isolated entity, because I think that another serious problem we need to address is the process of specialization within our discipline and the resulting hierarchies that are forming among these specializations, So:

Some affects of Professionalization on Composition when we look at it as an isolated entity.

It is, perhaps, inevitable that as a discipline grows larger, specializations based upon areas of inquiry, professional interests, methodological approaches, and so forth will emerge. In his work, for example, Stephen North describes a series of seven methodological Composition communities, which he further consolidates into two metacommunities, scholars and researchers. Members of these communities, he argues, often engage in "what might be described as. . .power play, an attempt by one methodological community or cluster of communities to assert its dominance over the others." North claims, in fact, that "this is the sort of movement that has. . .been most characteristic of the emergent field of Composition." (p.321)

Now, we may quibble with North over the number and nature of these communities, but his assertion that members frequently vie with one another for methodological dominance does suggest that stratification has been (and is) occurring within our discipline. I think that many of us recognize the

existence of a hierarchy and understand some of the mechanisms that enhance or diminish the value of the work we do. For example, it has become a commonplace that "too much" teaching is a liability and so I doubt that Jane Peterson raised many eyebrows last year when she referred directly to "a hierarchy exist[ing] within [our] profession" (p. 27) that places teaching below research/scholarship.

But simple stratifications based upon a teaching/nonteaching division of labor are of limited usefulness. I was intrigued, therefore, by Magali Larson's analysis of how "leaders" within a profession, those who create or reside upon a discipline's "cutting edge", get identified--because it would seem that the dynamics that identify individuals who wield power and exercise authority within a discipline might in some way be related to the forces that create and maintain professional hierarchies.

I don't know how closely most of us ever look at the mechanisms that single out the individuals who determine what will be important or valued within a discipline at a particular time, but I suspect many believe (or want to believe) in some sort of meritocracy wherein the "best" or most "deserving" persons (the most intelligent? insightful? diligent?) become the leaders of our professions.

This particular notion of how things work is comforting, but Magali Larson describes a rather different mechanism: Recall, if you will that a discipline requires a standardized body of knowledge so that it can be recognized as being distinct, but that this standardized knowledge is produce by and inseparable from the "personalities and cognitive makeups" of the individuals who provide it. Larson suggests that these conditions promote a set of circumstances in which the producers who claim leadership roles at any given time not only help define the nature and parameters of the

standardized knowledge, but "define, as well, the areas [within the discipline] that are not amenable to standardization." What this means is that leading scholars in a discipline define "the place of unique individual genius and the criteria of talent 'that cannot be taught.'" (p. 41) Quoting sociologists Jamous and Peloille, Larson also suggests that in the professions the ratio of indetermination (that which cannot be standardized and, thus, taught) to technicality (that which can be standardized/taught) is high and that since indetermination is mysterious (not susceptible to being coded and reproduced) it allows "secrecy. . .[and] control over productive skills. . .to remain in the hands of individual masters who can therefore pick and choose the apprentices with whom they are willing to share their secrets." (p. 41) If this analysis sounds positively Medieval, think about the pervasive notion within our profession that the "best" graduate students are those who get to "study with Professor So and So"; I wonder, also, what proportion of our current professional leaders are the former students of influential scholars.

Up to now, I've been somewhat theoretical about the professionalization of Rhetoric/Composition as well as the negative phenomena that may be associated with that process. So I'd like to conclude by describing in very specific terms several of the trends that I have observed and that I predict will escalate as professionalization continues:

- First, it seems to me that as our discipline grows, more upper-lever courses and graduate programs in Composition Studies will be established to provide "suitable" work for the increasing number of Ph.D. Specialists. This process will continue to remove the persons with the most training in Rhetoric/Composition from undergraduate writing classes, especially freshman composition.

- Second, I believe that increasing pressure to do research and to vie with one another for professional survival and/or advancement will force greater numbers of Composition Specialists to demand reduced teaching loads, which (in turn) will in these days of dwindling academic budgets create pressure to increase class size in undergraduate courses, particularly freshman composition, and/or to hire additional underpaid part-time instructors.

- Third, I think that the increasing fragmentation of Composition Studies and the resulting hierarchy of subspecialties will ensure that the needs of some student populations will continue to be addressed, while the needs of others will be ignored. I'd like to quote Russel Durst from his analysis of composition research from December 1984 to May 1989 (published in CCC, December, 1990) as an illustration of this. Near the conclusion of his study Durst argues that "At the practical level, we face growing pressure to address, if not solve, the literacy-related problems which beset American education." Immediately following this claim, Durst reports--not without dismay--that in all of the categories of composition research he reviewed, "only about five percent of studies focused on minority writers." (p. 404)

Having just spent twenty minutes playing the role of a sort of Composition Cassandra, I wish I could offer some ideas for addressing the disturbing phenomena I've described. But I can't. All I can suggest is one tentative step we might take towards making our profession responsive to more of its members and to more of our students--and that step is to turn our gaze upon ourselves now and then. After all, we have spent many years

examining what we do to, with, and for our students; perhaps a part of our efforts might be devoted to examining our own enterprise a bit more carefully.